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AUTHOR Yogman, Michael W.
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ABSTRACT

Research on the relationship between fathers and their children was provided to the Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families. Six areas were highlighted in terms of what has been learned about the father/child relationship, what information is still needed, and policy implications. Principal assertions included the following points: (1) fathers are increasing their involvement in family life in all subcultures and social classes, and this trend is likely to continue; (2) fathers can and do form significant meaningful relationships with their infants right from birth; (3) fathers are more likely to be their infant's play partner and have a qualitatively distinct style of play that is more stimulating and arousing than play among mothers and infants; (4) father's actual ongoing involvement with his child is influenced by forces within the family (mother's wishes, marital quality) and by forces outside the family (illness, job loss); (5) involvement of fathers during perinatal period is at a high level, currently approaching 100 across social classes and sub-cultures; (6) father participation in school programs and involvement with older children seems to diminish rapidly after infancy. (Author/BJD)

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FATHER'S ROLES WITH CHILDREN AND YOUTH:

Present at Birth, Discouraged Thereafter?

ECONOMIC SECURITY TASK FORCE
SELECT COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN, YOUTH AND FAMILIES
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, D.C.

HEARING: PATERNAL ABSENCE AND FATHER'S ROLES
NOVEMBER 10, 1983

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MICHAEL W. YOGMAN, M.D.

Associate Chief, Division of Child Development
Children's Hospital
Department of Pediatrics
Harvard Medical School
Boston, Massachusetts 02115
(617) - 735-6948

Ten years after extensive scientific study of the father-infant relationship, it is useful to reflect on the significance of this research with regard to what we have learned about fathers and children, what we still need to know, and what the policy implications are for this committee and for other public and private leaders.

I will address and later elaborate upon, six principal points:

1.) Fathers are increasing their involvement in family life perhaps across all sub-cultures and social classes. These are long-term trends, likely to continue.

2.) Fathers can and do form significant and meaningful relationships with their infants right from birth. Fathers start out as quite similar to mothers in their competence and capability to interact with young infants. Their sensitivity to the baby's behavior and rhythms is almost identical to that of mothers. A meaningful relationship between a father and his infant requires psychological availability as well as physical availability: Neither alone will suffice.

3.) Fathers are more likely to be their infant's play partner and have a qualitatively distinct style of play that is more stimulating and arousing than play among mothers and infants.

4.) Father's actual ongoing involvement with his child (as opposed to his capability for involvement) is influenced by forces within the family (mother's wishes, marital quality) and by forces outside the family, such as stress from illness or job loss or conflicts between employment demands and family involvement. Fathers express

considerable dissatisfaction with the limited time available for family life.

5.) Involvement of fathers during the perinatal period is at a very high level, currently approaching 100% across social classes and sub-cultures. This represents a dramatic change from ten years ago. Minimal brief, inexpensive interventions involving parental modeling and education have a dramatic effect on prolonging paternal involvement.

6.) Father participation in programs (schools) and involvement with older children seems to diminish rapidly after infancy. While a better understanding of this phenomenon is needed, conflicts between employment policies and family schedules and the lack of meaningful outreach programs for fathers of school-age children are likely explanations. Areas where policy interventions could be effective in sustaining greater father involvement in family life include courses in parenting, child care and child development services for school-age children of both sexes, changes in employment policies such as limited paid parental leave programs, better outreach to fathers by schools, and changes in health insurance plan reimbursement incentives so that counseling and human service consultations (for both parents) are reimbursed on an equal basis with medical/technical diagnostic procedures.

I Sociocultural Changes and Father Involvement

The American family is in a time of transition and stress. Parents are now more isolated from extended family members; they move more often and have fewer long-term friends and neighbors. As a result, parents need more support from within the family and from the public and private sector. Members of this Committee have struggled hard in the last few years to protect many of the current private and public programs which provide critical support to families.

Within the family, father is the most readily available source of support in helping to raise children. Sociocultural changes in Western societies provide the background for understanding why fathers are becoming more involved with their infants. The massive entry of women into the labor force has loosened many of the old sex-role stereotypes for men and women and now permits wider variations in the behavior and roles of the two parents with their infants. In a 1978 U.S. survey, 44% of women between the ages of 18-34 with children under the age of 3 were employed.[1] Furthermore, women's workforce participation represents economic necessity rather than career enhancement or feminist ideology; in families where women work full time they contribute 40% of family income.[2]

That men are more actively picking up the slack in family life attributable to the absence of working women is a reality, but men are also seeking increased emotional closeness with their infants as part of a men's movement toward fuller personhood and as a reaction against the alienation and burnout of the purely instrumental role of family provider. While some of the publicity about greater paternal involvement with infants may reflect social acceptability, a 1979 U.S. national survey of father participation in family work does suggest a real increase over the period 1960-1970.[3] Between 1975 and 1981, men's participation

in family work has continued to increase at the same rate so that these changes are not transient but rather long-term trends and likely to continue. They are occurring across social class and sub-cultural groups. The net effect is that children today receive more of their father's time than in our recent past.

II Competence of Fathers and Infants

While older theories of child development suggest that parenting is predominantly instinctual, biologically determined, and exclusively maternal, a careful look at scientific studies conducted in the last ten years does not support such a view of paternal incompetence with young infants. The evidence suggests that biological constraints are much less significant determinants of male care of infants than ecological influences such as the modal social structure.

Within contemporary Western society, the evidence that fathers and infants can develop a meaningful relationship right from birth is impressive. Furthermore, the similarities between the psychological experience of pregnancy and infant care for mothers and fathers are striking, even including the presence of psychosomatic symptoms in men during pregnancy such as nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain and backache. During the perinatal period, fathers are now almost routinely present during labor and delivery. In fact, husband support during this period lessens maternal distress, shortens labor and may even improve pregnancy outcomes.[4]

Since 1974, together with colleagues at Boston's Children's Hospital, I have studied the social interaction of fathers with their infants of two weeks to six months of age.[5] These studies have shown that fathers start out as competent and capable of skilled and sensitive social interaction with young infants. Fathers could be just as sensitive to their baby's behavior and rhythms of arousal as mothers and the infants clearly delight in this play with both parents. (Father-infant film here.)[6] These early interactions form the basis for older infants

and toddlers to display equivalent attachments to fathers as well as mothers.[7]

While similarities exist in parental competence between father-infant and mother-infant relationships, there is evidence to suggest that the relationships are complementary and not redundant,[8] and that in times of stress the father-infant relationship may even compensate for an inadequate mother-infant relationship and vice-versa.

1. Father-infant play

Regardless of the amount of time fathers spend with their infants, they are more likely to be the infant's play partner than the mother and father's play tends to be more stimulating, physical, vigorous, rough-and-tumble, and arousing for the infant.[9] These findings are suprisingly robust in that similar findings have been replicated with different age infants in different situations[10] and persist even in studies of primary caregiver fathers in the U.S.[11,5] and in studies of non-traditional fathers taking advantage of paternity leave in Sweden.[12] It is interesting to speculate that these play differences may become less tied to gender as socialization of young children changes. It is important to note that the performance of caregiving tasks seems more modifiable and more closely related to role rather than to gender. Nevertheless, these differences in play suggest that fathers seem more likely to develop a heightened, arousing and playful relationship with their infants[5] and to provide a more novel and complex environment.[14]

III Influences on Paternal Involvement

In spite of recent changes, fathers spend much less time with their children than mothers do. Even so, surveys in the U.S. indicate that at least 25-50% of fathers are involved in some caretaking responsibilities.[13]

Father's participation in family life can vary from total physical absence due to death or desertion; to psychological unavailability as might occur if a father was depressed after loss of a job, to physical and emotional availability which represents the only unequivocally positive paternal (or parental) contribution to an infant or child's life.

Father's actual ongoing involvement with his child is influenced by forces within the family and by those external to the family. Probably the single most important influence on father involvement is the mother's wishes. The mother seems to function much as a "gatekeeper" regulating the father's involvement with the infant. The mother continues to influence a father's relationship with his infant even when he is not home since mother conveys a representation of father in his absence.[15] When a mother first returns to work full-time, a transitional period occurs during which she actually spends more time with the infant in the evening which is associated with lower levels of father-infant interaction.[16]

The quality of the marital relationship is another intra-familial influence on paternal involvement. Fathers (as well as mothers) have better relationships with their infants where marriages are free of conflict. Conversely, in marriages filled with conflict, spouses may attempt to undermine the partner's parenting role.

Forces outside the family also have a major impact on father involvement. Stressful events such as maternal illness, a Caesarean section birth or the premature birth of an infant may act to increase paternal involvement as a family coping mechanism to support the mother. In the case of prematurity, enhanced paternal involvement may actually be beneficial to the infant's developmental outcome.[16] Conversely, paternal job loss with accompanying depression or even job insecurity is likely to diminish the psychological if not physical availability of the father to the child. Paternal job insecurity has been associated with increased illness in children.[17]

Employment policies and work schedules probably have the most powerful influence of all on father's role with children and youth and the influence is not a supportive one. In a recent pilot interview study of fathers I conducted during the perinatal period, fathers expressed considerable dissatisfaction with employee policies concerning childbirth leave or even sick days during childbirth. One father stated that he "had used his sick time and was not eligible for vacation." Another father who had used his sick time managed to pay a friend to work for him, such is the motivation of men to be with their families during this time. Even limited, paid short-term parental leave for fathers[18] is terribly important to these men. Allowing both parents to take sick days when children are ill (in addition to when they themselves are ill) is another example of a simple change in employment policy that is highly supportive of fathers, mothers and children. Employers such as AT&T are already aware that unmet family concerns may decrease employee productivity[19] and this may provide the best incentive for change.

An increasingly common response by families to work/family conflict is the growing pattern of shift work in which two parents work different shifts. In ten percent of U.S. families, parents' work schedules do not overlap.[20] Serious questions must be raised about the impact of this social experiment on children: what percent of these children are unsupervised by adults and do they contribute to the alarming statistic released by this committee's counterpart in the Senate that 1 million children under age 5 are unsupervised much of the day. By contrast, a recent study of flexible work schedules suggests that this encourages fathers to increase their involvement in childcare.[21]

IV Paternal Influences on Child Development

The influence of the father-infant relationship on later cognitive, social and emotional development of the infant has not been well-studied. The influence of the father-infant relationship on the infant during these early months is sug-

gested by the report that, at least for males, increased father involvement at home is associated with greater infant social responsiveness at five months of age during a developmental test.[22] Infants whose fathers participate highly in caregiving cry less after separation from parents and when left with a stranger than infants whose fathers are less involved.[13] In our own longitudinal study of healthy fullterm infants in Boston, paternal involvement defined by the sum of measures of prenatal and perinatal involvement and caregiving was correlated ($r = .39$) with infant developmental scores at 9 months (Bayley MDI). A simple measure of the involvement of young fathers living in Dublin, Ireland also correlated with 12 month cognitive scores and, when combined with measures of parental social class, neonatal behavior and maternal socialization goals in a multiple regression analysis, 57% of the variance in cognitive scores at 12 months was accounted for.[23] Concurrent predictions of infant developmental scores at 16 and 22 months were related to the father's positive perceptions of the child and his ability to engage the child in play and to anticipate independence on the part of the child. Predictions of concurrent social competence were related to the father's verbal and playful behavior and for girls, his expectations of independence.[10] Boys in particular have been found to be more autonomous when both parents are warm and affectionate.[24]

Most attempts to assess the impact of the father-infant relationship on later development have looked at father-absent families and the relationship to sex role identification. Father-absence, particularly prior to age five[25] has been shown to influence masculine sex role adoption and cognitive style among boys[26,27,28,29] and heterosexual roles among girls.[30] However, these studies have been criticized for confounding both the underlying reason for the father's absence and its effect on the mother.[31]

V Interventions to Sustain Father Involvement with Children

If even limited research suggests that father involvement is beneficial for children and youth, it seems wise to support continuing involvement. In fathers as well as mothers, the birth of an infant captivates them with a sense of excitement, hope, and a tremendous opportunity for renewal via a new generation. It is not surprising that dramatic changes in father involvement have occurred during this perinatal period. In 1972, only 27% of American hospitals allowed fathers to be present during birth. By 1980, the figure had risen to 80% and it currently approaches 100% for all social classes and all subcultures. We should be aware that hospital policies changed primarily as a result of economic incentives: with a falling birth rate hospitals were competing for business and strove to offer more attractive services to families. Men are increasingly participating in prenatal classes and in postpartum classes and caregiving demonstrations.

Inexpensive, simple interventions during this time have surprisingly longlasting effects on sustaining father involvement. Postpartum support groups have documented father's unmet needs for discussing their concerns and fears without being labeled aberrant. Several educational programs have shown that brief interventions with fathers in the perinatal period could influence their attitudes, caregiving skills, and knowledge of infant capabilities for as long as three months.[32] In Sweden, fathers who received simple instructions on bathing, changing, and feeding in the perinatal period were found to have higher degrees of infant caretaking activity as recorded on a maternal questionnaire six weeks after discharge.[33] Demonstrations of the Brazelton Newborn Behavioral Assessment (taking 20 minutes) to fathers in the newborn period has been shown to influence paternal involvement for as long as 6 months.[34,35] Simple interventions with fathers of older children (instructing them to play with their 12-month-old sons 5(minutes a day) were also effective. One month later, infants in the inter-

vention group showed greater degrees of closeness with their fathers during free play.[36]

Parent education must begin with school age children if we are to promote the involvement of fathers with children over the long term. In a few rare instances which will be discussed in more detail by The Fatherhood Project Staff, programs exist in which 7 year old boys are taught to take care of babies as part of a school curriculum. Adolescents need educational programs in high schools that provide information about parenting and child development. The workplace can also be a very important site in efforts to reach men with pre-parenting classes.

The high levels of father involvement with infants in the first few months and years of life do not currently appear to be sustained. While systematic data are not available, fathers are rarely seen in preschool or school settings and we must be concerned that they are less available to their children at home during this period as well. We need new research to understand why father involvement diminishes rapidly after children reach age 2 and we need to find ways to sustain paternal involvement and build on the hope and optimism of the perinatal period. More outreach by staff of schools is likely to be helpful as are changes in employment policies, and greater availability of educational programs for fathers as well as mothers. Finally, since stressful events are fairly common and a typical paternal response to stress is an emotional withdrawal from children,[37] we need to change reimbursement incentives so that fathers can more readily seek counseling services to cope with these stresses.

In conclusion, even when our social policies and programs satisfactorily reflect appreciation and greater knowledge of the father-infant relationship, men will still have to make personal choices regarding fatherhood. Our goal should be to make it easier for men to remain involved with their children. Any efforts to change policy toward fathers should aim to increase the options available

to fathers as well as mothers rather than promoting alternative constraints. At the same time, parental responses to this period of stressful transition for the American family, should remain sensitive to the implications for children and their needs. Families will continue to seek and, it is hoped, to find an optimal balance between the responsibilities and rewards of both work and parenthood. Ideally, an individual's need to achieve economic security and adult fulfillment should not compromise his or her opportunity to experience the emotional and creative joys that flow from intimate participation in the growth of a child.

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